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The case for maintaining curbside compost

TOM SIMPSON COMMENTARY

After going through the careful process of examining waste diversion options for the Fundy Region as a member of the Waste Diversion Committee representing Crane Mountain Enhancement, Inc. (CMEI), I am convinced that the Committee's recommendation — in favour of Option 3, initiating curbside recycling and continuing composting

— is the right decision for our region.

This option has been written off by some as a “Cadillac” plan that is too costly. However, in order to understand the importance of this recommendation, we need to look at the mandate and methodology of the Waste Diversion Committee, the environmental issues involved, and the true financial costs of all the options being considered. (The other options considered were Option 1, the upgrade of existing infrastructure; and Option 2, initiating curbside recycling and eliminate composting.)

ESTABLISHING THE COMMITTEE

In the summer of 2013, faced with major renovations to current waste diversion programs, Fundy Region Solid Waste (FRSW) requested a decision from the Fundy Regional Service Commission (FRSC) about the future of waste diversion at the landfill. FRSC voted to set up a committee representative of the whole region: one member from each municipality; two from Local Service Districts; one from small business, and one from Crane Mountain Enhancement, Inc.

The review was assisted by the Landfill's General Manager and Program Development officer. A consultant, Roland LeBlanc, Vice President of Atlantic Business Development for exp. Services Inc., was engaged by FRSC to provide third party expertise in the field.

The Committee was instructed to study options and make a recommendation to the FRSC. Matt Alexander, Ph.D., Environmental Sciences Manager at Fundy Engineering in Saint John, chaired the group. No one on the committee was paid.

The Committee met monthly over the course of a year, and spent many hours of deliberation before coming to their conclusion and recommendation. Public input is currently being sought by the Mayor of Saint John; it is important to note, however, that part of the Committee's mandate was to consult the public. Meetings were held throughout the region and telephone and online surveys were conducted.

The input from all of these sources was strongly in favour of Option 3 and strongly opposed to Option 2. Many residents who chose Option 1 or 3 made a point of adding “not Option 2” to their recommendation.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

According to the NB Department of the Environment, “public safety and environmental protection must be the primary considerations, at all times, in the planning and operation of all waste management programs.”

The Crane Mountain landfill is sited in the city of Saint John, on the aquifer for and upgradient of 1000 domestic wells. Groundwater from the landfill flows downward towards numerous waterways that flow into the St. John River, waterways that contain trout and salmon parr. Because the bedrock in this area is highly fractured, the direction and speed of groundwater flowing down from the site is unpredictable.

Going back to putting compostable material (organic matter) into the landfill would increase the amount of biological oxygen demand (BOD) in the landfill leachate. Leachate is the liquid that has passed through the garbage and picked up contaminants. The decomposition of organic matter in the cell sucks the free oxygen out of the liquid, leaving the leachate depleted of oxygen. If leachate with high BOD levels enters a stream or a well, the amount of oxygen in the water is reduced; aquatic life is harmed, and wells are polluted.

The leachate from the Crane Mountain landfill gets trucked daily to the Lancaster lagoon because there is no leachate treatment system at the landfill. However, the city charges extra if the BOD level is over 400. (Currently the BOD averages around 250.) The agreement with the city in regard to accepting leachate into the lagoon can be cancelled at any time, which could necessitate the installation of a leachate treatment facility at the landfill in the future.

Much has been said about the advantages of generating more electricity from the increased amounts of methane gas created by putting compost-able material back into the landfill. However, even after diverting some of the additional methane into electricity, ending composting would increase the amount of methane that escapes the gas collection system into the atmosphere by about 40 per cent. Methane gas is many orders of magnitude higher in its effect on global warming than CO₂.

Since composting was initiated at the Crane Mountain Landfill in 2001, several full-time landfill employees have taught residents how to compost, and encouraged institutions to compost. Community gardens have been built and supported across the region, using landfill compost. Businesses, through employee-driven efforts, have begun composting programs — for example, Tim Horton's, Sobey's, Bell Aliant, Irving Oil, and employees at City Hall have all taken part. Groups of school children have learned about the environmental importance of waste diversion and composting. All elementary schools and several local middle schools are engaged in composting programs.

What price would we put on telling our children that we won't be composting anymore?

THE TRUE FINANCIAL COST

It has recently been argued that Option 3 may be the right thing to do, but that it is simply too expensive. If this were simply a financial decision, the Waste Diversion Committee would have taken about 15 minutes to recommend Option 2 and gone home. However, the Waste Diversion Committee spent hours of study on this very subject. After a thorough review of the environmental and socio-economic impact of each of the options, the committee concentrated on how each of the options would impact the revenues and expenses of the landfill and based on historical tonnage, and what the change in cost would be for each municipality.

The best estimates of the committee's consultant, Roland LeBlanc, assisted by landfill management, for the cost increase/decrease of each of the options to the city of Saint John compared its current cost are as follows: Option 1-\$150,000 increase per year; Option 2 – \$25,000 decrease per year; Option 3 – \$500,000 increase per year.

If applied to the property tax bills of Saint John residents the impact would be as follows for each \$100,000 of assessment: Option 1 +\$3.00/yr; Option 2 -\$0.50/yr; Option 3 +\$10.00/yr.

In Mayor Norton's July 26th commentary published in the Telegraph-Journal, the \$175,000/yr saving mentioned for Option 2 was based on current cost plus the \$150,000/yr amount required for upgrades (Option 1). Based on the city's current cost before any changes are made, the saving for Option 2 is \$25,000 as shown in the paragraph above. Also, the \$50,000 net revenue mentioned for the electrical generation is actually annual net revenue for the landfill and was included in the cost calculated for Option 2 therefore, it does not represent any extra savings for the city going forward.

A RESPONSIBLE CHOICE

In conclusion, after going through this intensive study with an impressive group of community leaders, I am certain that Option 3 is the responsible choice for the Fundy Region. Curbside recycling and composting are both essential components of a modern waste management system and would bring our region in line with other forward-thinking municipalities.

Furthermore, option 3 is a real bargain for Saint John at approximately \$25 per household per year over what we pay right now for a lot less service. Some of our leaders seem to be thinking that it is of prime importance to save money today, regardless of the consequences. But future Councils and LSDs will have to pay for the environmental problems caused by this kind of short-sighted thinking.

I believe that the citizens of the Fundy Region deserve better than that. I believe that we are forward-looking people who want the best for our region now.

TOM SIMPSON is a member of the Fundy Region waste diversion committee.



In this archival photo, Dave Stafford holds a handful of soil from compost at the Fundy Region Solid Waste Commission. Waste diversion committee member Tom Simpson wants to maintain the regional composting program. Photo: Noel CheNieR/telegRaPh-JouRNal File Photo